

# Narcissists and Hotel Maids

By Sam Vaknin

Author of "Malignant Self-love: Narcissism Revisited"

Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the scandal-ridden former head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is entitled to the presumption of innocence until proven guilty. But, if he did try to rape the hotel maid in New-York in May 2011, his behavior would conform to the type of misconduct common among malignant narcissists.

Narcissists in positions of authority and celebrity narcissists exhibit a confluence of three pernicious phenomena: pathological charm (i.e., the illusion of being irresistible), the delusion of omnipotence, and the intractable conviction in their immunity to the consequences of their actions and, more particularly, misdeeds.

## **PATHOLOGICAL CHARM**

The narcissist is confident that people find him irresistible. His unfailing charm is part of his self-imputed omnipotence. This inane conviction is what makes the narcissist a "*pathological charmer*". The somatic narcissist and the histrionic flaunt their sex appeal, virility or femininity, sexual prowess, musculature, physique, training, or athletic achievements.

The cerebral narcissist seeks to enchant and entrance his audience with intellectual pyrotechnics. Many narcissists brag about their wealth, health, possessions, collections, spouses, children, personal history, family tree – in short: anything that garners them attention and renders them alluring.

Both types of narcissists firmly believe that being unique, they are entitled to special treatment by others. They deploy their "charm offensives" to manipulate their nearest and dearest (or even complete strangers) and use them as instruments of gratification. Exerting personal magnetism and charisma become ways of asserting control and obviating other people's personal boundaries.

The pathological charmer feels superior to the person he captivates and fascinates. To him, charming someone means having power over her, controlling her, or even subjugating her. It is all a mind game intertwined with a power play. The person to be thus enthralled is an object, a mere prop, and of dehumanized utility.

In some cases, pathological charm involves more than a grain of sadism. It provokes in the narcissist sexual arousal by inflicting the "pain" of subjugation on the beguiled who "cannot help" but be enchanted. Conversely, the pathological charmer engages in infantile magical thinking. He uses charm to help maintain object constancy and fend off abandonment – in other words, to ensure that the person he "bewitched" won't disappear on him.

Pathological charmers react with rage and aggression when their intended targets prove to be impervious and resistant to their lure. This kind of narcissistic injury – being spurned and

rebuffed – makes them feel threatened, rejected, and denuded. Being ignored amounts to a challenge to their uniqueness, entitlement, control, and superiority. Narcissists wither without constant Narcissistic Supply. When their charm fails to elicit it – they feel annulled, non-existent, and "dead".

Expectedly, they go to great lengths to secure said supply. It is only when their efforts are frustrated that the mask of civility and congeniality drops and reveals the true face of the narcissist – a predator on the prowl.

## **OMNIPOTENCE**

The narcissist believes in his omnipotence. "Believe" in this context is a weak word. He knows. It is a cellular certainty, almost biological, it flows in his blood and permeates every niche of his being. The narcissist "knows" that he can do anything he chooses to do and excel in it. What the narcissist does, what he excels at, what he achieves, depends only on his volition. To his mind, there is no other determinant.

Hence his rage when confronted with disagreement or opposition – not only because of the audacity of his, evidently inferior, adversaries. But because it threatens his world view, it endangers his feeling of omnipotence. The narcissist is often fatuously daring, adventurous, experimentative and curious precisely due to this hidden assumption of "can-do". He is genuinely surprised and devastated when he fails, when the "universe" does not arrange itself, magically, to accommodate his unbounded fantasies, when it (and people in it) does not comply with his whims and wishes.

He often denies away such discrepancies, deletes them from his memory. As a result, he remembers his life as a patchy quilt of unrelated events and people.

## **IMMUNITY**

Narcissists, like children, have [magical thinking](#). They feel omnipotent. They feel that there is nothing they couldn't do or achieve had they only really wanted to and applied themselves to it.

They feel omniscient – they rarely admit to ignorance in any field. They believe that they are in possession of all relevant and useful knowledge. They are haughtily convinced that introspection is a more important and more efficient (not to mention easier to accomplish) method of edification than the systematic study of outside sources of information in accordance with strict (read: tedious) curricula.

To some extent, they believe that they are omnipresent because they are either famous or about to become famous. Deeply immersed in their delusions of grandeur, they are firmly convinced that their acts have – or will have – a great influence on Mankind, on their firm, on their country, on others. Having learned to manipulate their human environment, they believe that they will always "get away with it".

Narcissistic immunity is the narcissist's (erroneous) feeling that he is immune to the consequences of his actions. That he will never be effected by the outcomes of his own decisions, opinions, beliefs, deeds and misdeeds, acts, inaction, or by being a member of certain groups. That he is above reproach and punishment (though not above being feared and

notorious). That, magically, he is protected and will miraculously be saved at the last moment.

What are the sources of this fantastic appraisal of situations and chains of events?

The first and foremost source is, of course, the False Self. It is constructed as a childish response to abuse and trauma. It is possessed of everything that the child wishes he had in order to retaliate: power, wisdom, magic – all of them unlimited and instantaneously available.

The False Self, this Superman, is indifferent to abuse and punishment. It shields the vulnerable True Self from the harsh realities experienced by the child. This artificial, maladaptive separation between a vulnerable (but not punishable) True Self and a punishable (but invulnerable) False Self is an effective mechanism. It isolates the child from a unjust, capricious, emotionally dangerous world. But, at the same time, it fosters a false sense of "nothing can happen to me, because I am not there, I cannot be punished because I am immune".

The second source is the sense of entitlement possessed by every narcissist. In his grandiose delusions, the narcissist is sui generis (unique), a gift to humanity, a precious, fragile, object. Moreover, the narcissist is convinced both that this uniqueness is immediately discernible and that it gives him special rights.

The narcissist feels that he is sheltered by some cosmological law pertaining to "endangered species". He is convinced that his future contribution to humanity should (and does) exempt him from the mundane: daily chores, boring jobs, recurrent tasks, personal exertion, orderly investment of resources and efforts, or even aging and death.

The narcissist is entitled to "special treatment": high living standards, constant and immediate catering to his ever shifting needs, the avoidance of the mundane and the routine, an absolution of his sins, fast track privileges (to higher education, or in his encounters with the bureaucracy). Punishment is for ordinary people (where no great loss to humanity is involved). Narcissists feel that they are above the law.

The third source has to do with the narcissist's ability to manipulate his (human) environment. Narcissists develop their manipulative skills to the level of an art form because that is the only way they could have survived their poisoned and dangerous childhood. Yet, they use this "gift" long after its "expiry date".

Narcissists are possessed of inordinate abilities to charm, to convince, to seduce and to persuade. They are gifted orators. In many cases, they are intellectually endowed. They put all this to the limited use of obtaining [Narcissistic Supply](#) with startling results.

They become pillars of society and members of the upper class. They mostly do get exempted many times by virtue of their standing in society, their charisma, or their ability to find willing scapegoats. Having "got away with it" so many times – they develop a theory of personal immunity, which rests on some kind of societal and even cosmic "order of things". Some people are just above punishment, the "special ones", the "endowed or gifted ones". This is the "narcissistic hierarchy".

But there is a fourth, simpler, explanation:

The narcissist just does not know what he is doing. Divorced from his True Self, unable to [empathise](#) (to understand what it is like to be someone else), unwilling to act empathically (to constrain his actions in accordance with the feelings and needs of others) – the narcissist is in a constant dreamlike state.

He experiences his life [like a movie](#), autonomously unfolding, guided by a sublime (even divine) director. the narcissist is a mere spectator, mildly interested, greatly entertained at times. He does not feel that he owns his actions. He, therefore, emotionally, cannot understand why he should be punished and when he is, he feels grossly wronged.

To be a narcissist is to be convinced of a great, inevitable personal destiny. The narcissist is preoccupied with ideal love, the construction of brilliant, revolutionary scientific theories, the composition or authoring or painting of the greatest work of art ever, the founding of a new school of thought, the attainment of fabulous wealth, the reshaping of the fate of a nation, becoming immortalised and so on.

The narcissist never sets realistic goals to himself. He is forever floating amidst fantasies of uniqueness, record breaking, or breathtaking achievements. His speech is verbose and florid and reflects this grandiosity. So convinced is the narcissist that he is destined to great things, that he refuses to acknowledge setbacks, failures and punishments.

He regards them as temporary, as someone else's errors, as part of the future mythology of his rise to power, brilliance, wealth, ideal love, etc. To accept punishment is to divert scarce energy and resources from the all-important task of fulfilling his mission in life.

That the narcissist is destined to greatness is a divine certainty: a [higher order or power](#) has pre-ordained him to achieve something lasting, of substance, of import in this world, in this life. How could mere mortals interfere with the cosmic, the divine, scheme of things? Therefore, punishment is impossible and will not happen is the narcissist's conclusion.

The narcissist is pathologically envious of people and projects his [aggression](#) unto them. He is always vigilant, ready to fend off an imminent attack. When inevitable punishment does come, the narcissist is shocked and irritated by the nuisance. Being punished also proves to him and validates what he suspected all along: that he is being persecuted.

Strong forces are poised against him. People are envious of his achievements, angry at him, out to get him. He constitutes a threat to the accepted order. When required to account for his (mis)deeds, the narcissist is always disdainful and bitter. He feels like Gulliver, a giant, chained to the ground by teeming dwarves while his soul soars to a future, in which people recognise his greatness and applaud it.

## **ACQUIRED SITUATIONAL NARCISSISM**

The Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is a systemic, all-pervasive condition, very much like pregnancy: either you have it or you don't. Once you have it, you have it day and night, it is an inseparable part of the personality, a recurrent set of behavior patterns.

Recent research (1996) by Roningstam and others, however, shows that there is a condition which might be called "Transient or Temporary or Short Term Narcissism" as opposed to the full-fledged version. Even prior to their discovery, "Reactive Narcissistic Regression" was well known: people regress to a transient narcissistic phase in response to a major life crisis which threatens their mental composure.

Reactive or transient narcissism may also be triggered by medical or organic conditions. Brain injuries, for instance, have been known to induce narcissistic and antisocial traits and behaviors.

But can narcissism be acquired or learned? Can it be provoked by certain, well-defined, situations?

Robert B. Millman, professor of psychiatry at New York Hospital - Cornell Medical School thinks it can. He proposes to reverse the accepted chronology. According to him, pathological narcissism can be induced in adulthood by celebrity, wealth, and fame.

The "victims" - billionaire tycoons, movie stars, renowned authors, politicians, and other authority figures - develop grandiose fantasies, lose their erstwhile ability to empathize, react with rage to slights, both real and imagined and, in general, act like textbook narcissists.

But is the occurrence of Acquired Situational Narcissism (ASN) inevitable and universal - or are only certain people prone to it?

It is likely that ASN is merely an amplification of earlier narcissistic conduct, traits, style, and tendencies. Celebrities with ASN already had a narcissistic personality and have acquired it long before it "erupted". Being famous, powerful, or rich only "legitimized" and conferred immunity from social sanction on the unbridled manifestation of a pre-existing disorder. Indeed, narcissists tend to gravitate to professions and settings which guarantee fame, celebrity, power, and wealth.

As Millman correctly notes, the celebrity's life is abnormal. The adulation is often justified and plentiful, the feedback biased and filtered, the criticism muted and belated, social control either lacking or excessive and vitriolic. Such vicissitudinal existence is not conducive to mental health even in the most balanced person.

The confluence of a person's narcissistic predisposition and his pathological life circumstances gives rise to ASN. Acquired Situational Narcissism borrows elements from both the classic Narcissistic Personality Disorder - ingrained and all-pervasive - and from Transient or Reactive Narcissism.

Celebrities are, therefore, unlikely to "heal" once their fame or wealth or might are gone. Instead, their basic narcissism merely changes form. It continues unabated, as insidious as ever - but modified by life's ups and downs.

In a way, all narcissistic disturbances are acquired. Patients acquire their pathological narcissism from abusive or overbearing parents, from peers, and from role models. Narcissism is a defense mechanism designed to fend off hurt and danger brought on by circumstances - such as celebrity - beyond the person's control.

Social expectations play a role as well. Celebrities try to conform to the stereotype of a creative but spoiled, self-centered, monomaniacal, and emotive individual. A tacit trade takes place. We offer the famous and the powerful all the Narcissistic Supply they crave - and they, in turn, act the consummate, fascinating albeit repulsive, narcissists.